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ABSTRACT

A review of the history and literature about the runaway child in America reveals that young people from poor families have always viewed running away as a reasonable way of leaving a poverty stricken home. For many adolescents, running away has been a response to an unhealthy family or work situation, and at times it has been a problem-solving behavior. Since early colonial days, running away has been synonymous with seeking adventure, romance and one's fortune. Last but not least, running away has been an expression of independence, often marking a passage into adulthood. Periods of great social, economic, cultural and political change have always fostered runaway behavior, and periods of war have also contributed to this syndrome. It is time to change the current legal and clinical definitions concerning the runaway child in America. While running away may be an indication of inadequate social or psychological development for limited number of youths, there is evidence to suggest that for many adolescents, it may more accurately represent a positive reaction to serious problems or a natural reaction to certain predictable societal forces. (Author)

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RUNAWAY CHILDREN

AND

SOCIAL NETWORK INTERACTION*

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INTRODUCTION

There is little if any doubt that adolescents who run away from home in our society are considered to be a significant social issue. Since the mid-1960's, there has been increased interest in and concern for the growing numbers of children who leave their parents (or guardians) before they are of legal age. Unfortunately, there has been a tendency to perceive and perhaps even to dismiss this behavior as a delinquent activity or as a mental disorder, despite the fact that there is little agreement about the cause and meaning of this social phenomena. In doing so, many law enforcement, mental health, social welfare and youth advocacy professionals have contributed to the creation of a viewpoint which inhibits reasonable and wise social policies for these adolescents. In order to develop an accurate theoretical perspective, therefore, it is crucial to consider some of the social, historical, political and economic factors that contribute to the incidence of this behavior in America.

DEVELOPMENT OF A PERSPECTIVE

Long before the American War of Independence, the runaway child was a familiar person in the settlement and development of the original thirteen colonies. Some experts believe that "running away" is of recent vintage; however runaway children were among the earliest immigrants to the eastern shores of this nation. *Running away to America, and more significantly, running away while in America has traditionally grown out of a mixture of youthful expectations and hope for a better life away from home as well as*

out of frustrations and despair over current life circumstances.

There are certainly numerous accounts of young and daring teenagers who ran to America in the sixteen and seventeen hundreds attracted by a sense of excitement, fascination and adventure. But there are also historical references of many poor children, particularly from English, Scottish, Irish, Dutch and Portuguese families who ran away from dreary, miserable and often oppressive conditions in Europe (Aries, 1962). Seeking work, if not fortunes, and with the simple expectation of better circumstances in a new land, these youths left their families and ran to port cities where arrangements could be made for passage to the colonies. Today, poverty is still one factor which contributes to the runaway syndrome.

Running away to this country was part and parcel of the founding of this nation. There is much evidence to suggest that the runaway child in America has played an important role in the growth and development of this country. Benjamin Franklin provides an excellent example of how a spirited nature, a desire for travel and the need to assert personal independence led to an important runaway experience. Of course, running away was not confined to urban locations or even to the more populated sections of the country. The western frontier was often explored and settled by youths like Davy Crockett who ran away at age thirteen from his frontier Tennessee home in order to escape a harsh father and to travel in the western wilderness.

Periods of social change and stress have always increased the incidence rate of runaway behavior. This has been true during every American war, during

periods of great economic turmoil, and during times of cultural or social exploration. Probably the best and most relevant example of this latter phenomenon was the counter-cultural youth movement of the 1960's.

What made this youth movement such an extraordinary occurrence was the fact that many, perhaps even a majority of these youths were from comfortable middle and upper-class families. Running away to Greenwich Village in New York, to Boston, San Francisco or Berkeley became a common event. When the runaway youth issue reached "middle America", it became for the first time, an issue of public attention and concern. The creation of the first runaway youth programs in the late 1960's and the passage of federal legislation, the Runaway Youth Act of 1974, are but two indicators of keen interest.

THEORETICAL CONSIDERATIONS

The literature that does exist on runaway youth, and it is surprisingly sparse, reveals diverse and oftentimes contradictory opinions and perceptions. One pronounced and prevalent viewpoint has been that running away is evidence of individual psychopathology. This segment of the literature most often defines the runaway child as disturbed, impulsive, disorganized and/or delinquent (Riemer, 1940). A second perception, while not necessarily refuting the former position ascribes situational external forces such as family or school pressures as causative (or contributing) factors responsible for such behavior (Skinner and Nutt, 1944). A third and perhaps more contemporary theoretical assumption is that running away may be a natural outgrowth of certain predictable societal forces and may represent for some adolescents, a healthy self-

actualizing and growth producing activity (Balser, 1939).

There has been and continues to be a propensity to overlook several important variables that have affected if not actually defined the nature and scope of knowledge about runaway youth. While it is always beneficial to be concerned with organizing and synthesizing what is known about a subject, it may be just as necessary to identify and analyze that which is unknown or that which has not yet been investigated. These deficiences or gaps in knowledge also can be instructive as part of the process of forming a framework for understanding the broader dimensions of the runaway phenomenon. *There is reason to believe that the existing body of literature is more reflective of and informative about the types of social networks that have interacted with this population of young people as well as the professional training and field setting of the researcher, than it is about the actual subject under consideration.*

Almost by definition, running away is an enigma for those who seek to investigate and study this behavior. Those who "leave home prematurely" are generally transient, often escaping from home or heading to some new or alternative destination. Because of many adverse legal sanctions, most young people on the run are reluctant, or at least hesitant to communicate or interact with traditional social settings. It is not surprising therefore, to find that there is a good deal of uncertainty about the exact number of adolescents who partake in this activity from year to year (Brennan et. al., 1975).

SOCIAL NETWORKS

Much of what is known about runaway children is a direct reflection of the type and kind of agency that has, over the years, maintained responsibility for this population. That is to say that many runaway youths have been controlled, treated and/or served by a number of agencies which comprise several particular social networks. A careful reading of the literature suggests that knowledge about this phenomenon has been derived from four networks. These are identified as the *police-legal network*, the *mental health network*, the *social welfare network* and the *self help-youth advocacy network*. Two additional networks should also be categorized although to this date, there is almost no literature or information about either of them. They are designated as the *"helping peer-adult network"* and the *"no network"* pattern of interaction.

POLICE-LEGAL NETWORK

Young people under eighteen years of age who run away, that is, who leave home without parental permission, have been and generally still are considered lawbreakers in this country. The precise legal statutes in many states have been vague and unclear (Beaser, 1975). A warrant by a parent or the issuing of a stubborn or wayward child charge has frequently been sufficient for arresting and incarcerating a runaway child. Simply being away from home has made a young person vulnerable to legal sanctions while citizens who offer shelter to these youths are also in violation of the law. Despite recent efforts to decriminalize these laws in many states throughout the country, many young run-

aways are still adjudicated within the police-correctional network (Andrew and Cohn, 1974). As in the past, juvenile courts, probation departments and reformatories still play a significant role in controlling these youths.

MENTAL HEALTH

In more recent decades, the mental health profession has become an important helping service as well as an influencial treatment and controlling agent (Goldenberg, 1971). Psychiatrists and clinical psychologists have been involved in juvenile court clinics and child guidance centers. These clinicians have devoted much time to examining and diagnosing, not to mention treating, young people who have run away. Although there is considerable controversy and difference of opinion regarding the cause and meaning of runaway behavior, the American Psychiatric Association has officially categorized running away as a mental disorder (Jenkins, 1971).

SOCIAL WELFARE NETWORK

Since the late nineteenth century when social reformers helped to create special judicial procedures and correctional institutions for youthful offenders, a development that lead to the creation of the juvenile justice system runaway children have been a concern to many social service agencies (Nyquist, 1960). Platt (1969) traces the catalyst for this movement to be the influence and involvement of reform-minded middle-class women who were particularly concerned with and about troublesome immigrant youths. The Traveler's Aid Society, the Young Men's and Women's Catholic Association, settlement houses and various community emergency shelters are but a few of the social welfare agencies that

have worked with runaway youths since the turn of the century.

SELF-HELP

The self-help youth advocacy network is a product of the past decade (Gordon, 1974). Growing out of the anti-poverty efforts of the 1960's as well as the turbulent anti-war movement, this network represents a group of individuals who have, for the most part, rejected much of the professionalism of the clinician and the delinquency labeling of the police-correctional network. While lacking a precise ideology, most youth advocates view juveniles as powerless victims of an unjust and uncaring society. Therefore much effort is given to helping young people gain control over their own lives. Workers in this network are frequently non-professionals who place much emphasis on giving assistance to those young people who voluntarily request it. Because self-help workers, particularly those involved with runaway programs, have been primarily concerned with providing services, relatively little has been written about the interaction of runaway children and this network.

PEER-ADULT NETWORK

The first of the two less formal and recognizable networks is the helping peer-adult network. Many children who run away turn to their friends or peers for support and assistance. Runaway youths often communicate with a friend's parent, frequently a trusted and caring figure. In many cases, a peer or helping adult provide the first alternative shelter for a child who has departed from home. Helping peers and adults may also be total strangers. While for the most part this interaction is voluntary and supportive, some of these helping figures are neither benevolent or kind. Little is known about this network

or its patterns of interaction.

NO NETWORK

The last network carries the ironic title of "no network". It covers the experience of those youths who manage to leave home and not interact with any of the forementioned networks. In some context, these adolescents can be considered "successful runaways" in that they leave home and manage independently without any formal network interaction. There is no literature and very little recognition of these youths although their numbers may be considerable.

In order to further explore and analyze the meaning of past research endeavors in the field, it is useful to examine, in greater detail, some of the implications and ramifications of the interaction between those who have studied "runaway youth populations" and those who have participated in this behavior. As previously mentioned, young people who run away are hard to find or locate. This simple fact poses special problems for those professionals who seek to study these young people. Not surprisingly then, much of the previous knowledge in the field is from settings, primarily those in the police-legal network and mental health network, in which most runaways tend to be captured, controlled and treated on an involuntary basis.

During the past fifty years, much of what has been written about the "runaway child" reflects research and investigation within the domain of the police-legal network, especially in detention homes, correctional institutions and court clinics. Since running away by definition has been categorized as a law breaking activity, the very process of entering this network is a stigma-

tizing one in which runaway adolescents are, at the very least, labeled as juvenile delinquents and troubled youths.

The mental health network, particularly the child guidance clinic, has historically been a major point of interaction between those who run away and those who study this behavior. Mental health professionals, most noticeably psychiatrists and psychologists, have been responsible for the diagnoses and treatment of these young people who are thought to be exhibiting deviant behavior patterns. As trained clinicians, these therapists have been increasingly involved in juvenile court settings. Since many runaway youths have found their way to these settings, usually under involuntary circumstances either already labeled as delinquent or in the process of being diagnosed, the mental health professional has assumed a vital role in classifying these adolescents. These clinicians have exhibited a tendency to focus on the intrapsychic dynamics of the young person's behavior, frequently ignoring the psychosocial variables. Within the framework of their training, many of these professionals have, over the years, often concluded that running away is a psychopathological disorder and mental illness.

RUNAWAY YOUTH and the SELF HELP NETWORK

In order to expand and enhance the knowledge base about runaway youth behavior, it is imperative to investigate the interaction between these youths and the lesser known networks. This process will inevitably provide new insights and information about these adolescents while also improving our under-

standing of formal and informal networks.

The purpose of the following section is to briefly review the findings of a study conducted in 1975 which examined the interaction between runaway children and the two leading self-help projects in Boston, Massachusetts.* This study attempted to record, often retrospectively, the experiences of one hundred runaway children from the time they decided to leave home to the point in time in which they interacted with Project Place or Bridge Over Troubled Waters. The most significant findings are summarized below:

> The single most prevalent cause of runaway behavior was unsatisfactory family dynamics. For a majority of young people who left home and interacted with either of these self-help programs, running away was a response to serious and often times severe family tensions.
>
> Changes within a family unit, whether it be in the form of a divorce, separation, re-marriage or death of a parent often was a major causative factor in the child's decision to leave home.
>
> Parental physical and sexual abuse were a prevalent condition in more than one third of the runaway episodes. In most cases, this abuse was either a sporadic or continuous condition rather than a singular event. Frequently these parents also exhibited an alcohol abuse problem.
>
> Economic deprivation, a young person's drug and alcohol abuse problem, difficulties at school, individual psychopathology and cultural alienation were identified as secondary but not primary reasons for leaving home. Very few youths left home with the idea of simply seeking out an adventuresome experience.

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*Support from the National Institute of Mental Health contributed to the development of this study. Another relevant investigation by the author is entitled *Runaway Kids and Runaway Youth Programs: A Follow-Up Study.* It explores the interaction between children and self help runaway programs after these youths completed their association with the projects.

Before leaving home, more than three quarters of these youths sought out some form of help. Most frequently they turned to peers and adults within their respective communities. While peers, particularly close friends, were viewed as more sympathetic, adults were reported to be more helpful, especially in providing alternatives to living at home.

Those children who ran away from home and took up residence with a friend or a friend's family while in crisis, most often found these arrangements to be suitable for only a short period of time. Host families were often unprepared or unwilling to provide the necessary support and shelter for more than three or four days.

Only seven percent of the runaway children who interacted with self-help programs were aware of these runaway projects before they left home. (Ninety percent of the runaway children in this study lived within seventy-five miles of Boston). Once away from home, runaway children were most likely to learn about such programs from a peer population.

More than one third of the adolescents who interacted with the self-help network rejected (or objected to) being categorized as a runaway child. Many of these youths expressed the conviction that they were forced out or thrown out of their homes. Therefore these children believed that there was no sense of choice in their decision.

Nearly ninety percent of the runaway children in this study were aware that they were breaking a law or subject to legal adjudication when they left home. These legal constraints did not deter them in their decision to run away. More than half of these youths did report that concern about being caught by the police had a significant effect on their behavior once they left home. Most frequently, it made them more cautious in making contact with traditional social networks, and it increased their contacts with peers and "street people".

Approximately seventy percent of the young people in this investigation entered a self-help program because of the voluntary nature of this interaction. Three quarters of these youths stated that they were seeking advice or solutions to a problem at the time they interacted with these programs. Of the remaining population, most young people were primarily motivated by the need to find

immediate shelter, a service provided by the two self-help programs.

At the point in time when runaway children first interacted with a self-help program, three quarters of the youths believed that their decision to leave home was a good one. Running away was most commonly described as a means for gaining some much needed distance and space. Many youths explained that it provided a way of dealing with difficult and perplexing circumstances. Nearly one quarter of these youths believed that leaving home was a way of actually solving a personal or family problem.

SUMMARY

As revealed in this recent study involving runaway children and the self-help network, leaving home was most often caused by serious, and even critical problems within the family. If running away is viewed as a family dynamic, it clearly involves not only the child who runs away but those who remain behind. It well may be that those youths who leave a destructive or disorganized family are reacting in a healthy manner. Running away or seeking alternatives to these conditions can be an indication of personal strength rather than a symptom of character disorder.*

Three quarters of the children in the Boston study believed that their decision to leave home had been a good one. For many of these youths, running away may be interpreted as a problem-solving strategy. This action was a way of gaining new perspectives, a seeking out of help or a method of indicating the existence of a serious personal or family problem.

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* That is not to say that running away is always a healthy or proper decision. However there were very few cases in this study in which the decision to run away was simply a reflection of a "character disorder", an impulsive personality or an immature mind.

There is a great need to narrow the existing gap of knowledge and understanding concerning runaway children. Being neither a creation of the turbulent 1960's nor a minor passing fad, the issue of runaway adolescents in our society is now, and will continue to be a major concern for years to come. Presently, our society often labels runaway children as psychopathological or delinquent (or perhaps both). Yet there is much evidence to challenge and refute these assumptions.

Reviewing the history of and the literature about the runaway child in America reveals that young people from poor families have always viewed running away as a reasonable way of leaving a poverty-stricken home. For many adolescents, running away has been a response to an unhealthy family or work situation, and at times it has been a problem-solving behavior. Since early colonial days, running away has been synonymous with seeking adventure, romance and one's fortune. Last but not least, running away has been an expression of independence, often marking a passage into adulthood. Periods of great social, economic, cultural and political change have always fostered runaway behavior, and periods of war have also contributed to this syndrome.

It is time to change the current legal and clinical definitions concerning the runaway child in America. *While running away may be an indication of inadequate social or psychological development for limited numbers of youths, there is evidence to suggest that for many adolescents, it may more accurately represent a positive reaction to serious problems or a natural reaction to certain predictable societal forces.* As such, running away may be viewed as a healthy response for many young people in this country.

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